

MEMO

Date: May 9, 2006
To: Joint Policy Committee
From: Christy Riviere, Senior Planner, Association of Bay Area Governments
Re: CORRIDORS PROGRAM: Community Support Assessments

Background

The Association of Bay Area Governments has developed a “corridors program” to facilitate implementation of the Vision along three major corridors in the Bay Area: East 14th/International Boulevard, El Camino Real, and San Pablo Avenue. The Network of Neighborhoods Vision calls for the majority of new population growth to be accommodated through increased densities and infill development along the region’s major transportation corridors and at transit stations.

As acknowledged by the JPC, Vision implementation can be best achieved through local government commitment to, community support for and engagement in neighborhood planning and land use changes that are supportive of the principles underlying the Vision. The Corridors Program is focused on realizing this support.

Outcomes from the Corridors Program will include: 1) an assessment of community support for the Vision, and 2) an assessment of existing conditions and plans (as a measure of local government support) against the Vision.

These assessments will be used to inform the development of further regional Bay Area Vision implementation programs, including an outreach program, technical assistance, and measuring of regional progress.

The purpose of this staff report to the JPC, is to share what we have learned by “assessing community support” for the Vision.

Community Support Assessments

People often hold strong negative perceptions regarding change. This is especially true with regard to new development that may result in changes to the character or urban form of existing neighborhoods. Resistance to new development is often presented in the context of fears (real or perceived) about increased traffic congestion or new populations coming into an area.

To better understand the reality of and the reasons for these perceptions, a phone survey was developed and administered to “opinion leaders” in the neighborhoods along the three corridors of the corridor planning program: East 14th/International Boulevard, El Camino Real and San Pablo Avenue. For El Camino Real, only Santa Clara County was surveyed. A parallel effort for

San Mateo County is currently being completed, but lags the rest of our survey in order to coordinate with a survey being performed by San Mateo County Transit District (SamTrans).

Target Audience/Respondents

Opinion leaders were selected as the target audience. Surveying opinion leaders, rather than individuals allowed us to leverage the in-depth knowledge that such individuals have of their communities. This was especially important considering our budget and time limitations.

Opinion leaders constituted heads of community based organizations, neighborhood associations, home owners associations, environmental advocacy organizations, and merchant or business groups. For many neighborhoods, especially those along El Camino Real, more homeowners were represented than renters. In some instances, individuals elected to not speak for the organization or its members, but rather as an individual expressing their personal opinions.

Survey Questions

The survey questions were designed to assess public opinions regarding neighborhood needs and concerns, new development, especially housing development, transportation choices and access and involvement in both the planning and development process. These topics were selected due to their direct correlation with our Vision implementation outreach goals, which include:

- To build public awareness of and support for the principles embodied in the Vision
- To build public awareness of and support for local land use planning and development projects that support the Vision.
- To encourage genuine, collaborative neighborhood planning in the region, so that local governments and residents can work together to identify neighborhood needs and to ensure those needs are then incorporated into locally adopted policies, plans and development.
- To encourage and assist local governments in developing and conducting meaningful and effective outreach strategies to genuinely engage community members in the planning and development process.

The survey questions were all open-ended questions, versus close-ended questions (check the box questions). We felt this would allow for more in-depth responses, thereby enabling us to capture deeper insights on the issues and the unique nuisances that may exist in individual communities. The open-ended questions also allowed us to learn about the variety of opinions that exist on these issues, amongst the corridors, between the neighborhoods along each corridor, and often times, within individual neighborhoods.

Findings

The results of the public opinion polling exercise revealed that overall people highly value being part of a “community.” People were very in touch with those elements that make their existing community complete or incomplete; for instance people recognized if their community lacked affordable housing, jobs, neighborhood serving retail, access to alternative transportation modes or parks and open space.

Generally, people are very aware of the region's housing affordability issue. Yet, concerns about density, building heights, crowding and other factors associated with building more housing were consistently raised. Support for more housing in existing neighborhoods was voiced if placed in the right locations and if it was integrated well into community. Often times the corridor was identified as the right place for increased housing development.

Having transportation choices was valued across the region. Driving was cited as the most common mode of transportation. However, where transportation options were available, these were often cited as neighborhood strengths. Where there was access to BART or a quality bus line, such as the 72 Rapid bus that serves San Pablo Avenue, respondents reported regular use by residents.

Walking was cited as a common transportation mode in neighborhoods that have pedestrian amenities, places to walk to, such as to transit or neighborhood retail, or in low-income communities where many people do not have cars or where there is aged population. If the walking environment was improved, respondents generally felt that more people would choose to walk more often.

In terms of development, people varied greatly in their support. Overall, lower-income communities seemed more supportive of development, as they seemed interested in neighborhood improvements and added services, especially neighborhood retail. Upper income communities also voiced support, but were more concerned that new development be well designed, that it would add to the "character" of the neighborhood and that it include neighborhood services, such as restaurants. Overall opposition was most noted if the community felt that it was not engaged in the decision making process.

The level of community engagement, or depth of engagement, was highly dependent on education and income levels, whether there was a strong community-based organization that mobilized the community, and past experience with local government. Most respondents felt that those who wanted to be engaged were, although barriers were noted, including timing, access to childcare and language or cultural barriers.

Common methods for learning about planning and development include local newspapers, city and other government newsletters, television, word of mouth (neighbors), and community-based organizations, and email listservs.

Next Steps

Over the next few weeks, ABAG staff will be finalizing the Bay Area Vision Awareness, Advocacy & Outreach Program, which includes a "public information campaign" component.

The public information campaign will be developed and administered in the Bay Area to raise general public awareness of and support for planning and development that supports the principles of the Vision. Gaining an understanding of current public opinions and perceptions pertaining to the issues underlying the Vision has been identified as the first step in the development of this campaign. What has been learned through this process will be used to develop the messages and to identify target audiences for the campaign.